

# Religious selection is only part of the problem with faith schools

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*Ending religious discrimination in faith school admissions is an important first step – but it will not undo all the harms caused by faith schools, says Alastair Lichten.*

It's easy to see why [religious selection in admissions](#) dominates the debate over faith schools. It is perceived by many as their most obvious and egregious problem. It is a form of direct and open discrimination that would be unlawful and unacceptable in almost any other public context, and contributes to the problems of middle-class parents '[gaming the system](#)'.

[Public opinion](#) is clear on this matter. Even many supportive of, or more ambivalent about, faith schools strongly oppose religious selection, making it unpopular across all religion and belief groups. Support for religious selection of pupils is such a minority view that defenders of the practice are forced to rely on [obfuscation](#) and exaggerated claims about how difficult a transition to open admissions would be.

Supporters and opponents of faith schools are often united in seeing open admissions as a stepping stone (or a slippery slope, depending on perspective) towards a fully secular or community ethos education system. On the other hand, some supporters of faith schools see open admissions as a necessary compromise to shore up their continuation.

There are clear benefits to ending faith based selection in schools that extend beyond ending discrimination and segregation on the basis of religion or belief. An end to religious selection would reduce [associated forms of social selection](#). Faith schools would gradually become more representative of their local communities. With a more pluralistic intake, they could be forced to moderate their approach and to take greater account of those who do not share their faith.

But open admissions wouldn't solve all the problems with faith schools. While open admissions would give families a fairer choice when faith schools are oversubscribed, what about where they are undersubscribed or not wanted? What about the hundreds of thousands of families across England with [little or no choice but a faith school](#) locally?

Open admissions may make oversubscribed faith schools, particularly CofE or Catholic schools, more representative of their communities, and therefore reduce many forms of segregation. However, other minority faith schools which are even more unpopular with families from other backgrounds could remain highly segregated. For example, the 50% cap on religious selection in new faith-based academies has been [less effective](#) in encouraging integration in Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish schools. Northern Ireland shows religious segregation can be driven by social attitudes and exclusionary practices, rather than direct religious selection.

What's more, open admissions alone don't make a school inclusive when its [religious education](#), [school assemblies](#), [relationships and sex education](#) (RSE), [teacher selection](#) and [inspections regime](#) are all organised around an exclusive religious ethos. [New faith school proposals](#) often point at the ability for pupils from other faith backgrounds to gain places to deflect from all other issues of inclusion.

Faith schools also use open admissions to argue that parents attending such schools - often their only practical option - are accepting all aspects of the religious ethos, and should not complain.

For politicians overestimating the [popularity](#) of faith schools, supporting open admissions feels like a safer option. It makes sense to form broad coalitions to tackle the specific issue of admissions, and work together to [mitigate harms](#) of faith schools and make incremental improvements. A policy of open admissions would be simpler than working out the details to get rid of faith schools, and reformers may wish to temporarily sidestep such questions.

But limiting criticisms of faith schools in pursuit of some allies can have long term problems. For example, campaigners seeking to introduce statutory RSE in different parts of the UK understandably sought to work with all schools, including faith schools. However, such campaigns often downplayed the problems with [how RSE is delivered in many faith schools](#), and in their haste to celebrate a victory, have robbed attention from these problems.

This isn't to say that the direct benefits of ending faith selection wouldn't be significant, or that the moral imperative to end such discrimination isn't clear.

Achieving a secular and inclusive education system free from religious privilege, discrimination, or control, will be a lengthy process. Ending the ability of faith schools to religiously discriminate in admissions is only the first step.

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## Alastair Lichten

Alastair ([@AlastairLichten](#)) is a former head of education at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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